

Review of the book *Understanding homicide*, Fiona Brookman. London: Sage Publications, 2005.

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In *Understanding Homicide*, Fiona Brookman presents a comprehensive overview of homicide in the United Kingdom. Like many topical texts, this book provides the reader with quantitative information that describes patterns, characteristics, and typologies as well as theoretical information that describes the body of knowledge used to explain the phenomenon. What sets this book apart is not its focus specifically upon the United Kingdom, but rather its ability to critically assess our current state of knowledge regarding homicide. Homicide is discussed as a socially constructed crime category that is difficult to define and categorize due to the diversity of forms it takes. These very same characteristics make it difficult to develop universal theories and formulate preventative policy strategies. The reader is left with the impression that very little is known about homicides. Moreover, what is known is shaky at best.

The book is separated into four sections. The first section deconstructs the definitions of homicide that are produced by legal categorizations and social constructions. Brookman contends that traditional legal categorizations of homicide (e.g., murder, manslaughter, and infanticide) are limited, arbitrary, and do not encompass all the instances in which an unlawful killing may occur. In an effort to expand the concept of homicide, accidental death categories are evaluated according to their potential reconstruction into homicides. Similarly, undiscovered bodies, missing persons, and inaccurate cause of death classifications are discussed as a pool of potential homicides that will not be defined as such. After acknowledging the inherent difficulty in formulating a single definition of homicide and highlighting the downward bias of homicide statistics that rely upon legal categorizations, the remainder of the section examines homicide data for the three U.K. jurisdictions (i.e., England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) and begins to develop generalized patterns, event characteristics, and typologies of a homicide encounter. Additionally, the data section advances the importance of age, race, class, and gender to the understanding of homicide, which is an underlying theme throughout the remainder of the book.

The second section examines theoretical discourses that have attempted to explain homicide. Biological, psychological, and sociological explanations are discussed in terms of their historical and contemporary content as well as their underlying philosophical assumptions. Theories within each of the individual discourses are critiqued, and the reader is informed of the criticisms, contributions, and limitations of a theoretical approach to the study of violence in general and of homicide specifically. Noting the complexity of a homicide encounter and the limited explanatory scope of the theoretical approaches, Brookman suggests a movement toward integrative theories that encompass "the interplay between, at the very least, the offender, victim and facilitating environment" (p. 118). This suggestion is made cautiously, however, as the diverse nature of a homicide encounter makes it difficult to develop a single theory that universally explains homicide.

The third section examines four specific forms of homicide and sheds light upon the variability within and between distinct categories of homicide. Offender, victim, and event characteristics, vignette supported scenarios, and an exploration of the theories that may explain the specific type of homicide encounter are discussed. An initial emphasis is placed upon the development of a gendered understanding of homicide with a focus upon male- and female-perpetrated homicides. Male versus male and male versus female homicides are discussed, and the differences and similarities between the genders are analyzed. The remainder of the section moves towards homicides that are more “atypical.” The homicide of children and infants is examined with a focus on male, female, and child perpetrators. Multiple homicides, in the context of serial killers, terrorists, and corporations, also are discussed.

The final section of the book examines the investigation process and efforts to prevent homicide. Although practical in nature, this section brings the focus back to the socially constructed nature of homicide. The investigation portion of the section focuses upon the degree of police interpretation and inference that is needed to construct a homicide event in a manner that will fulfill legal requirements. The roles and responsibilities of individual actors in the investigation process are discussed, and the section highlights important decision points in which a crime may or may not be classified as a homicide. The remainder of the section provides a general overview of preventative strategies. It is followed by an examination of specific strategies utilized to prevent domestic, child/infant, and alcohol-related street homicides. Similar to the discussions of homicide definitions and theories, a single preventative strategy that will curtail all homicides is simply unattainable. A fragmented approach may have more of a preventative effect, with specific strategies geared towards a specific category of homicide.

Brookman’s ability to destabilize our understanding of homicide and challenge the reader to ask additional questions about the existing homicide knowledge base is the strength of the book. A few of the sections could have benefited from further elaboration. For instance, the third section attempted to develop a gendered understanding of homicide. Male versus male and male versus female encounters are used to examine male perpetrated homicides. For female perpetrated homicides, female versus male encounters were examined, but female versus female encounters were overlooked. The discussion of the similarities and differences between the two genders would have been stronger if both genders were examined equally instead of placing the focus upon intimate partner and/or acquaintance homicide. Despite such marginal weaknesses, the book provides a comprehensive and insightful examination that may benefit students and scholars with an interest in homicide.